

Travel

Room at the Inn

Berwyn Lewis

Is it a mirage? Did we take the wrong camel track back there in the dunes? No. It's the Hotel Tamerza Palace and the shimmering expanse of its swimming pool. Nestling in the ancient city of Tamerza, in western Tunisia, it is an unexpected sight, rising out of the Sahara.

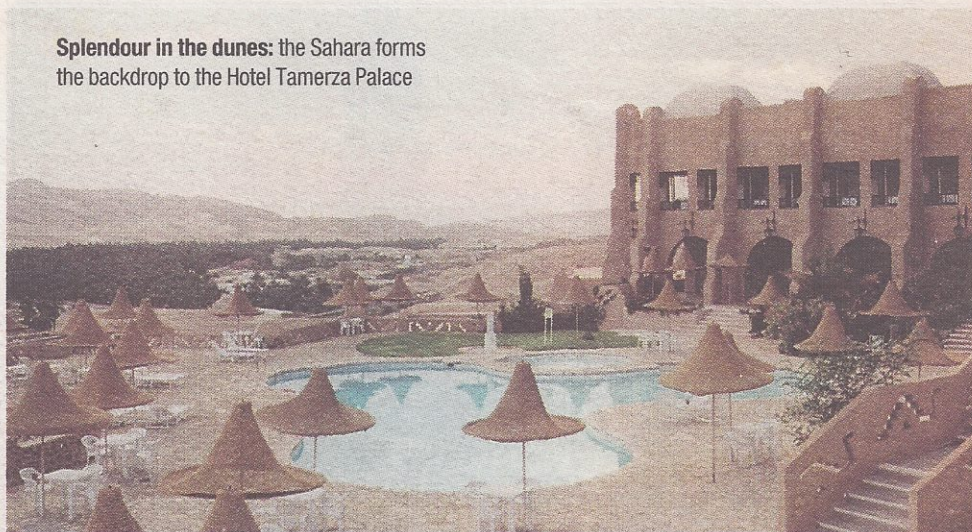
If you've never heard of it, don't worry; the staff think Australia is Austria and are astonished to learn we speak English. We are the first Australians to stumble in with our guide from Atlantis Voyages and a four-wheel drive on the way back from sightseeing the locations of *Star Wars* and *The English Patient*.

With its Arabic-French Foreign Legion fortress-style architecture, the Tamerza Palace demands immediate surrender. We take the least line of resistance and repair to our palatial room. Jasmine blossoms are scattered on the pillows, a plate of Arabian pastries lies in ambush, cool l'eau d'orange and mint are in the air and lunch is being served.

We negotiate through *hourria*, a salad of cooked carrot flavoured with *harissa* (ground red chilli) and garlic, *kefta de poisson* (fish croquettes), couscous with lamb, chicken and *merguez* (sausage), and a platter of fresh pomegranates. Their sun-ripened flavour erupts on the tongue. We stagger off for a siesta.

Later, Lawrence of Arabia style, we explore an abandoned village on the other side of the wadi. Gaping walls of *hammams* (steam baths), *ksars* (grain silos) and a cafe at the end of the universe are all that remain of this washed-away village. The eerie silence is broken by a storm: "the marriage of the wolves" is the local term for when lightning and glinting rain appear in clear blue skies. As the desert

Splendour in the dunes: the Sahara forms the backdrop to the Hotel Tamerza Palace



1001 delights

sands melt from orange-pink to purple, a biblical sound arises from the local mosque as the muezzin calls evening prayers.

The star-sprinkled sky and a perfumed 1001-nights experience unfolds. But stars are not only overhead at the Tamerza Palace. The leading cast and principal crew of *Star Wars* and *The English Patient* stayed here and, in 1996, the hotel was home for two Italian films, *The King of the Desert* and *The Fire of the Desert*. According to the visitors' books, a Japanese prince and princess, the president of Germany, ambassadors, first secretaries and incentive groups from large European companies are among the regulars.

The Tamerza Palace is also a base for a national-heritage train, The Red Lizard. Designed for use by the former *bey* (king) and his retinue in 1910, it is the *pascha* way to tour.

Next morning we toy with breakfast on

our balcony as a donkey carrying a Bedouin nimbly picks its way past a Berber tent village. In the pool, bikini-clad tourists are frolicking and, 8km away across the Algerian border, a different reality dawns. Welcome to Tunisia, the land of converging cultures.

Checklist

TARIFF at the Hotel Tamerza Palace starts at 55,000 dinar; one dinar = \$US1 (fixed government rate). For details, phone or fax 0011 216 645 3722. Dinars have no value outside Tunisia; keep exchange receipts for currency checks at departure. For details of 4WD guided tours with Atlantis Voyages, phone 0011 216 133 4855 or write to 22 Avenue Habib Thameur 1000, Tunis, Tunisia. Visas are required but can be purchased on arrival at Tunis International Airport; cost is \$US10 plus a passport photo.

Brickbats: Only one hotel shop; no nearby supermarkets or malls to buy supplies.

Bouquets: Peace, luxury and clean air, with views of the desert, oasis and deserted village.